

Ham & High

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Fine words save squat

HISTORIAN and novelist Gillian Tindall is backing a group of squatters in their fight to stay in a former nursery, writes Lara Lambert.

In a letter addressed to a judge at the High Court, where the group appeared last Thursday, Ms Tindall, who lives next door to the squat, in Leighton Road, Kentish Town, praised the "responsible attitude" and "respect" that the squatters have shown to the St Margaret's nursery site.

"They have cleared and cleaned the buildings, undertaken repairs, removed accumulated rubbish, unblocked drain heads that were causing damp patches, repainted the gates and turned the block back into usable space for the first time in years. They are infinitely more desirable [caretakers] than Camden," she said.

The squatters, a collection of students, musicians, drifters and eco-activists who want to turn the site into what they have called a "community housing action zone" for the homeless, won a short reprieve from the council's eviction order when the judge adjourned the case for a week to give them time to apply for legal aid. The Ham & High heard on Tuesday that the group had been granted legal aid and are due to be represented by a lawyer when they appear again before the judge today.

Ms Tindall has campaigned to get Camden to take responsibility for the site since 1990 and, with the support of her neighbours and MP Frank Dobson, she has lobbied the council about alarm bells going off at night inside the unattended buildings, drunks urinating in the gardens, and "disgusting and dangerous" piles of rubbish, that at one point set fire to trees at the bottom of her garden.

The former residential nursery

Novelist's plea keeps bailiffs from door

comprises three buildings one of which is a listed building (a former Bowery Cottage or soup kitchen built in the 1830s that has been empty for three years), and another that housed council social services offices until last year. The squatters occupied these two buildings for two months before Camden lodged an order for possession.

But Ms Tindall, who wrote a book about the history of Kentish Town, was surprised at Camden's "swift" response. "The council did not even realise that the entire site is Camden property, until my husband and I informed them of the fact," she said. The electricity was still connected when the squatters moved into the empty buildings, she added.

The squatters have offered to lease the premises from Camden and to work with the council by helping to implement "Agenda 21", a government commitment to solve homeless and environmental problems at local level made at the Rio environment Summit in 1992.

Although Camden has appointed a number of officials to implement its commitment to Agenda 21, there is no specific department dealing with the issues and the work has been diffused across various departments.

"We've got 25 people prepared to work for nothing," said Dave Roberts, a 29-year-old student studying Chinese at Leeds



● Skill-sharing squatters in the Leighton Road nursery.

University. Mr Roberts trained as a maintenance fitter and plumber when he first left school and has spent the summer holiday fixing the toilets and unblocking drains on the site.

He pooled his skills with other occupants such as Kevin, an unemployed carpenter from Lincolnshire in his 40s, whose skills proved invaluable repairing broken slats on the roof of the listed building.

Other members of the squat have contributed in their own way. An ex-journalist and an ex-policy worker for Oxfam compiled the squatters' agenda.

The proposal states that they intend to use the empty premises as a base from which to assist in the accommodation of the homeless; train the unemployed to help themselves; provide environmental education and set up recycling

programmes in the community; and form links with other voluntary and statutory organisations in Camden to enhance resources.

Already the Interchange Trust, which manages a number of community projects in partnership with Camden, and St Mungos, a Roman Catholic church in nearby Lady Margaret Road, have pledged their support.

Plans to convert the squat into a community housing action zone are backed by the Rainbow Tribe, which squats St John The Baptist Church in Highgate Road, Kentish Town.

Both squats advocate a "DIY culture", based on the sharing of skills to overcome the failure of the authorities to provide housing and training for themselves.

A spokesman for Camden said the council was looking for alternative uses for the building.

